

E-biomed

The E-biomed proposal [1] by National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Harold E. Varmus, M.D.—posted on the NIH Web site on May 5, 1999, with commentary and an addendum (June 20, 1999) added since that time—has caused quite a stir, especially among the traditional biomedical journal publishers. Many traditional publishers characterize the proposal as a threat to their very existence as the prime evaluators of the scientific and clinical evidence and disseminators of the scientific record. In particular, publishers of clinical research are concerned that premature, unvetted reports of clinical research might be harmful to the public good. Publishers of journals sponsored by scientific societies worry about the monetary effect on their organizations because substantial revenue is often derived from the publication of a specialty journal. Relman's editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* sums up the issue related to clinical research evaluation and dissemination:

In clinical research, the best way to handle new data is to require rigorous peer review before their dissemination and, with few exceptions, to post the results in electronic data bases only after they have been published in carefully edited, peer-reviewed journals. That is because prepublication evaluation of the reliability of clinical studies and impartial assessment of their implications for health care are usually more important than the speed with which the data are made available [2].

Varmus characterizes E-biomed as a democratizing force for science that would provide open access and rapid dissemination of scientific information, enrichment of publication presentation methods, and a more open review process, and would save substantial sums of public and private money by moving to an elec-

tronic format. In his words, "such means of publication can accelerate the dissemination of information, enrich the reading experience, deepen discussions among scientists, reduce frustrations with traditional mechanisms for publication, and save substantial sums of public and private money" [3].

E-biomed proposal

The June 20, 1999, addendum to the original proposal summarized the intent of the proposal:

E-biomed is intended to be a new and more effective means to organize, disseminate, use, and store information and ideas generated by the international biomedical research community. We envision a system for electronic publication in which existing journals, newly created journals, and an essentially unrestricted collection of scientific reports can be accessed and searched with great ease and without cost by anyone connected to the Internet. In a sense, what we are proposing is an electronic public library of medicine and other life sciences. Journals that participate in the E-biomed system would be expected to exercise expert review and editing functions. The NIH, in conjunction with other organizations, would contribute technical expertise, participate in the development of the governance of the system, and help with financial support [4].

The E-biomed proposal would establish a dual track Web publishing scheme in which authors could choose to submit manuscripts in two different ways. The first way would provide a separate pathway to traditional biomedical journal publishing (paper and electronic) by providing a mechanism through which authors could seek rapid dissemination of the results of their research via the E-biomed vehicle, but retain the rigor of a traditional peer review evaluation offered by

journal editorial boards. These E-biomed publications could also appear in traditional printed publications or their electronic versions. The second way that authors could use E-biomed essentially establishes a new type of Web-based formal publication. In this scheme, two individuals with appropriate professional credentials and working with evaluation criteria (established by an E-biomed governing board) could authorize the posting of a research report to the E-biomed general repository. These general repository research reports will not have gone through the more rigorous evaluation process by a journal editorial board and have raised a red flag among traditional journal publishers.

Serving the interests of libraries

Health sciences libraries play a vital role in the biomedical communication process and scientific advancement through access, acquisition, dissemination, retrieval, and preservation of the scientific record. The E-biomed proposal will benefit libraries in their endeavor to provide timely and authoritative information for scientific and clinical decision making and scholarly pursuits. The proposal would establish a new methodology for electronic publishing of benefit to many constituencies. The degree of controversy the proposal has caused underscores the power of the message and the closeness of fit to the technological capabilities and the electronic landscape of biomedical communications now beginning to emerge within the ongoing paradigm shift from traditional to electronic publishing.

The fact that E-biomed would operate within the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), a component of the Nation-

al Library of Medicine (NLM), offers greater assurance that the interests of health sciences libraries throughout the world will be considered. These interests include but are not limited to universal access, end-user training, techniques of literature retrieval and evaluation, archival preservation and media migration, retraction for errors and scientific misconduct, and copyright and fair use.

MLA Executive Director Carla J. Funk responded to the E-biomed proposal on behalf of the MLA Board of Directors and noted that "MLA considers E-biomed a very positive development," but also re-

quested that a librarian be appointed to the E-biomed governing board "to aid in the development of policies and strategies that will respond to the real issues faced by the wide array of potential E-biomed users" [5]. Although a strong library presence will be assured with the participation of NCBI and NLM, additional formal representation by a librarian on the proposed governing board would strengthen the link to all levels and categories of health sciences libraries.

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